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Vance Credibility on Line Over SALT

A new credibility problem has arisen in the SALT II controversy, and this time it's not just the Soviets' credibility that's being questioned. It's Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance's.

In his enthusiastic promotion of the strategic arms limitation treaty, Vance has often wound up as an apologist for the Soviet Union using weasel words to cover up Soviet cheating. He will say, for example, that we can verify the treaty provisions "adequately," or that there were no "significant" violations of the first SALT agreement.

Last year, in a slickly worded State Department report to Congress that subsequently was released to the public, Vance went beyond mere fudging. He made, or permitted to be made, an outright misstatement of the facts, intelligence sources told our associate Dale Van Atta.

Vance assured Congress that the Soviets had lived up to a particular section of SALT I when he knew or should have known that they had not.

If Vance knew his assurance was false, that would be unforgivable. If he didn't know, it would be almost as bad, indicating that the secretary of state wasn't reading the statements put out in his name or the intelligence reports on which they were based.

The issue involved the limit set on the number of ballistic missile launchers in the Soviet navy's vast submarine fleet, an important weapon in their strategic arsenal. Under the 1972 treaty, the Soviets agreed to a

limit of 740 of these missile launchers.

If the Soviets went over the limit of 740, they were required to destroy or dismantle an equal number of older missile launchers. Yet according to Central Intelligence Agency documents, the United States became aware that the Soviets had begun to exceed the 740 limit by August 1975.

U.S. intelligence estimated the number of unauthorized launchers at six and the State Department's treaty-enforcement officials mulled over the violations for several weeks. But before they could decide how to push this particular cookie, the Soviets blithely announced that they were indeed over the agreed-upon limit by 23 missile launchers.

Embarrassed intelligence officials did a hasty reassessment and "concluded that the Soviet report accurately reflects the status of the force under the agreement."

Like the deadbeat who assures a creditor that "the check is in the mail," the Soviets promised that the 23 missile launchers they "owed" us under the treaty would be dismantled by March 1976, as well as 27 more that would have been replaced by new launchers by that date.

When March rolled around, though, the Soviets had junked only nine of the 50 launchers. Blaming winter weather for the delay, the Soviets then promised that the 50 launchers would positively, absolutely be on the scrap heap by June 1, 1976.

The State Department bought the

Soviet alibi about the weather, even though intelligence sources noted that the Russian winter hadn't prevented the Soviets from putting together missile silos. It also bought the Soviet promise that everything would be hunky-dory by June.

Sure enough, when June came, the Soviets assured our SALT watchdogs that the launchers had been dismantled. This was an out-and-out lie.

Our intelligence agencies found that the 50 missile launchers weren't junked until the next October, by which time the Soviets owed us several dozen more to compensate for their continuing production of new launchers.

Yet Vance, in his report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Feb. 21, 1978, tried to make the Soviet cheating on the sub launchers seem like a triumph of no-nonsense treaty enforcement by the United States.

"The Soviet side," Vance said, "explained the situation and predicted that all the dismantling actions would be completed by June 1, 1976, and agreed to the U.S. demand that no more submarines with replacement launchers begin sea trials before such completion."

Then he added flatly: "Both conditions were met." That was simply not true, and if the secretary of state didn't know it, he should have.

Footnote: Intelligence sources told us the blatant violations continued at least up to 1978. Thus for fully two years, the Soviets were always above the agreed-upon limit of sub-based missile launchers.